



# A Thorn for Beauty

## J. HORACE MCFARLAND

*Virginia Kean*

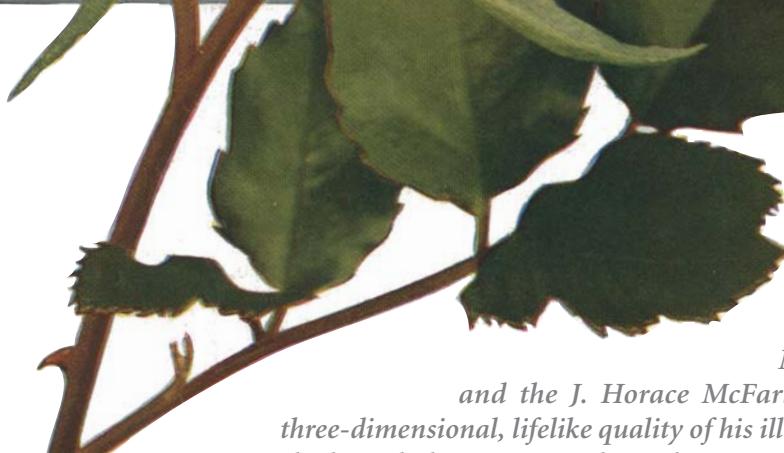
September 29, 2009 marked the 150th anniversary of the birth of J. Horace McFarland, the first president of the American Rose Society. In *J. Horace McFarland: A Thorn for Beauty*, author Ernest Morrison tells the story of this remarkable printer, photographer, author, editor, civic activist, pioneering conservationist, champion of Niagara Falls, “father of the National Park Service,” gardener, and rose man.

McFarland was born in McAlisterville, Pennsylvania in 1859, the eldest son of a Union veteran of the Civil War. Upon moving his family to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania at war’s end, Lt. Col. McFarland bought a newspaper and the Riverside Nurseries. He began printing *The Temperance Vindicator* on a small press set up in a balcony above the family kitchen. As a young boy, J. Horace helped run the press and set type for advertisements, handbills, and flyers. By age 16 he was running the printing business.

**LEFT:** J. Horace McFarland with *Rosa primula* in his garden at Breeze Hill, 1947 (photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania)

**RIGHT:** McFarland wrote that ‘Breeze Hill’, a large-flowered 1926 Climber by Dr. Van Fleet, was “a fine, sturdy and almost immense rose.” He goes on to note that after pressure from him, the Department of Agriculture finally approved its introduction, and then named it for his garden (photo from McFarland’s *Roses of the World in Color*, 1938).





*'Ville de Paris'* is characteristic of McFarland's style of portraying roses and other plants in the nursery catalogues and books printed by Mount Pleasant Press

and the J. Horace McFarland Company. The three-dimensional, lifelike quality of his illustrations is achieved not only through the camera angles and positions he used in taking the photographs but through allowing parts of the rose to extend beyond their frame or background. Thus his roses "pop" on the printed page. Passionate about color accuracy, McFarland improved on the color photo printing process invented by William Kurtz. By adding black rather than grey to Kurtz's three-color process, he achieved a depth and richness of color that still impress today.

ABOVE: 'Ville de Paris' from a Bobbink & Atkins catalogue, 1931. In *Roses of the World in Color*, 1938, McFarland notes that this 1926 rose was among the last introductions of Pernet-Ducher and that it "well deserved the Bagatelle Gold Medal it received."

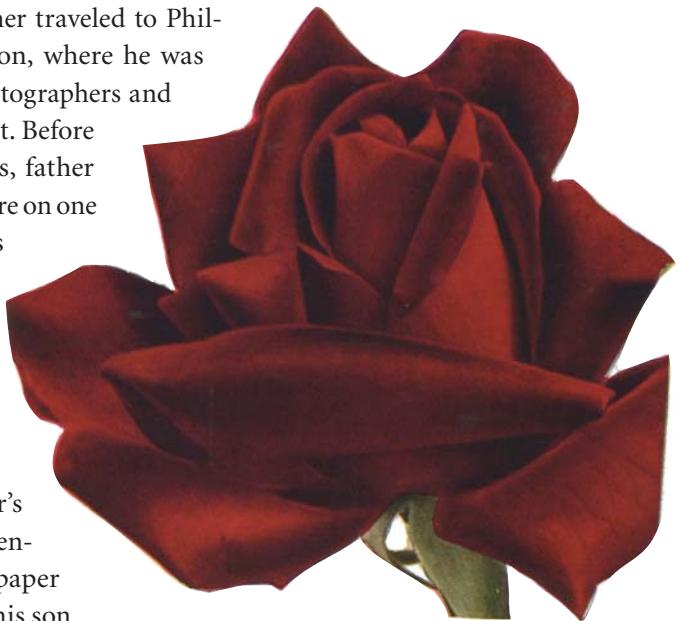
TOP RIGHT: In *Roses of the World in Color*, 1938, McFarland described 'Crimson Glory' as "glowingly, richly crimson, intensely fragrant, and in this writer's garden a group of it has true rose glory."

In 1875 J. Horace and his father traveled to Philadelphia's International Exhibition, where he was dazzled by the displays of 194 photographers and makers of photographic equipment. Before returning home, Morrison writes, father and son stopped at a graveyard where on one headstone they found the words "Benjamin Franklin, Printer." From that moment, he says, the younger McFarland determined to be a printer; J. Horace later remarked that "the only Bible he knew outside of the church" was Thomas MacKellar's manual *The American Printer*. Eventually, his father shut down the paper and gave the printing business to his son.

The worlds of printing, photography, and plants (especially roses) were to define McFarland's long life. But at 19, with only four years of formal education, he became a "job printer." Since Harrisburg had many printing companies, McFarland aimed to specialize in the untapped field of horticultural printing. To persuade seedsmen and nurseries to move beyond printed seed lists for their customers to advertising their products through illustrated booklets that would result in volume print orders, McFarland sent out postcards explaining to growers that education and publicity were things they should do. And he visited Pennsylvania's nurseries, where his experience in his father's gardens and greenhouses proved invaluable. These travels around the state deepened his understanding of horticulture, and he made connections and friends everywhere.

He learned the art of photography by trial and error, becoming proficient with the bulky equipment and sensitized glass plates, and with the tripod and focusing cloth used to cover the camera and photographer. Morrison writes that he even "recommended a light-weight, closely woven woolen one" over a rubber one. The photographic process was slow and from it McFarland learned patience and persistence.

His printing business, Mount Pleasant Press, which incorporated in 1891 as the J. Horace McFarland Company, became known for its dedication to quality and innovation. McFarland began setting the standard for horticultural printing. While he resisted fine printing and "senseless ornamentation," he did insist on the beauty and attractiveness of his publications, accurate color, and the correct spelling of the Latin names of plants. He trained and developed guidelines for his editors and proofreaders. He considered each employee permanent, and according to Morrison they reciprocated that loyalty. Although Mount Pleasant Press only operated at full capacity twice a year due to the seasonal nature of horticultural catalogue printing, there were no layoffs and the company thrived.



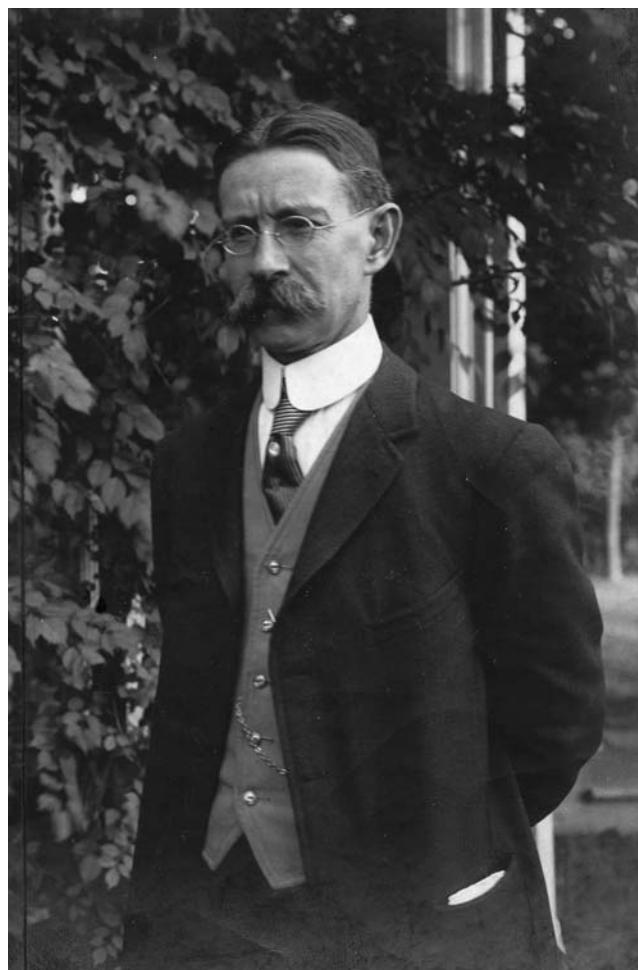


ABOVE: 'Rosyln', a Hybrid Tea from a Pennsylvania hybridizer (Towill, 1929) from *Roses of the World in Color*, 1938

RIGHT: McFarland at Breeze Hill, his new home, in 1909 (photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania)

McFarland worked hard to develop other sides of the business—magazine and book printing. By 1888, with the publication of *Floral Designs, a Handbook for Cut-Flower Workers and Florists*, he was a book printer. In 1890 he published his first periodical, *American Gardening*, and thus began his career as an editor and writer. McFarland would go on to write for major American magazines of the day—*Outlook*, the *Chautauquan*, *Suburban Life*, *Harpers Weekly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *House and Garden*, *House Beautiful*, and the *Ladies Home Journal*. His column in the latter urged civic activism and promoted the cleanup and beautification of American cities.

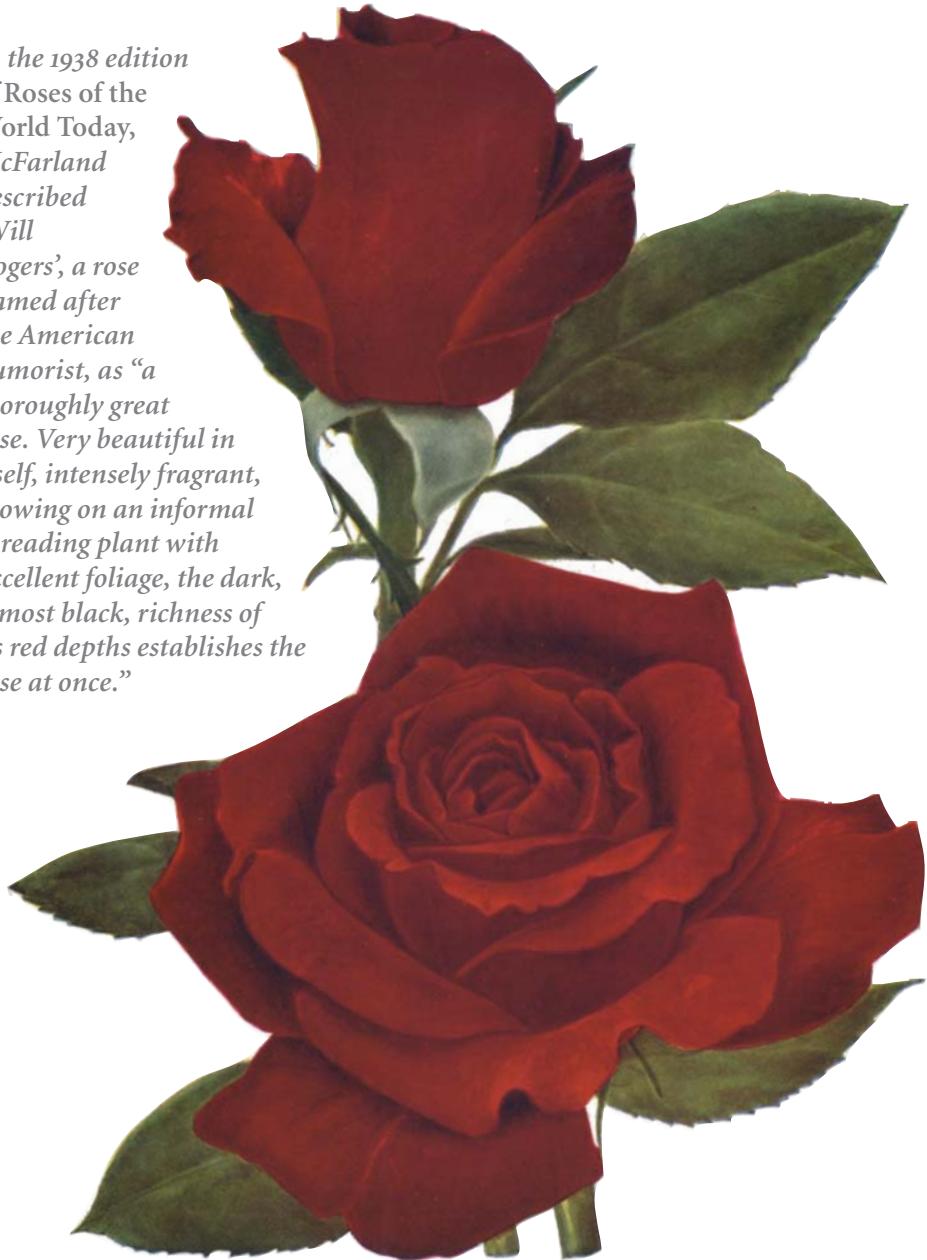
By 1885, American magazines were the most profusely illustrated in the world, Morrison claims. And in the final decade of the nineteenth century the race was on among publishers and printers to capitalize on the speed and lower cost of printing photographs using halftones rather than woodcuts. McFarland was the first to put halftones into horticultural publications, using plates made on vulcanite by Frederic Ives in Philadelphia. Soon he joined forces with New York City photographer William Kurtz, the first to print photos in color. Kurtz tempted McFarland away from Harrisburg to run the Colorotype Company. The arrangement did not last long. McFarland found it impossible to establish



*“I should like no better epitaph than that it might be said . . . that here dwelt a man who loved a garden, who lived in and grew with it, and who yet looks upon it, even from afar, as a garden growing for all who love the beauties of God’s green earth.”*

—J. Horace McFarland,  
from *My Growing Garden*,  
published by the MacMillan Company in 1915

*In the 1938 edition of Roses of the World Today, McFarland described 'Will Rogers', a rose named after the American humorist, as "a thoroughly great rose. Very beautiful in itself, intensely fragrant, growing on an informal spreading plant with excellent foliage, the dark, almost black, richness of its red depths establishes the rose at once."*



the business practices necessary for success, and he was frustrated that "there was never any real development of either the licensing or the screening effort."

Returning to Harrisburg, McFarland threw himself back into his printing business and began using Kurtz's new color process for printing photographs. He had initially illustrated his catalogues with woodcuts made by Albert Blanc from photographs he or his son Robert had taken. The first Blanc woodcut he printed in color took seven impressions to get the desired colors and shades. His major innovation was

the addition of black rather than Kurtz's grey to the three-color printing process, which he felt brought more depth to the images.

Biographer Morrison writes that McFarland came of age in an era marked by John Ruskin's "ideas on art, civic responsibility, city building, and social action." But it was also an era of economic turmoil, strikes, bank failures, and the birth of unions. American cities had become bleak, ugly reminders of the worst effects of the Industrial Revolution. At the turn of the nineteenth century McFarland's hometown, Harrisburg, was filthy, the Susquehanna River polluted. The city had no sewage treatment, no system of public parks for the health and enjoyment of rich and poor alike. Galvanized by an outbreak of typhoid in the city, McFarland leapt onto the national scene in 1902 with his calls for the cleanup of Harrisburg. In 1904 he became president of the American Civic Association, which he led for twenty years. From that platform he sought to convert Americans to a different vision of the cities many now lived in, and to awaken a patriotic appreciation for the scenic but unprotected beauty of their country's wilderness and national parks.

The success of Mount Pleasant Press gave McFarland the freedom to campaign around the country and give lectures, which he illustrated with his own lantern slides. Astute, plain-spoken, informed, unflappable, persistent—McFarland was a highly effective leader and organizer for the causes he championed. He understood publicity, the power of images, and the force of public opinion.

In 1904 he began writing articles for the "Beautiful America" department of the *Ladies Home Journal*. In one titled "Shall We Make a Coal-pile of Niagara," he mobilized the disenfranchised women of America, urging them to write President Theodore Roosevelt about protecting Niagara Falls from the Canadian and U.S. power



LEFT: 'Will Rogers'

ABOVE: View of Breeze Hill with 'Excelsa' in the foreground  
(both images from *Roses of the World in Color*, 1938)

companies which were determined to divert its water for their own profit. More than 6,000 answered his call. Taking the case for federal protection to Washington himself, he argued for taking permit power from New York State, and called for a treaty with Canada, ultimately winning Roosevelt's support in 1905. The treaty safeguarding Niagara was finally signed with Great Britain in 1909.

While traveling and lecturing around the country to save Niagara Falls, McFarland went \$4,000 into debt. His management style—hire good people, train them and let them get on with it—enabled Mount Pleasant Press to survive. But the Niagara campaign and the five-year fight waged with conservationist John Muir to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park from damming to provide water to San Francisco took a toll. In a letter from 1912, J. Horace wrote, “I have a dozen other activities which have nothing to do with making a living, and sometimes I get completely flattened out.” In 1913, after their failure to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley, Muir retreated from public life and McFarland suffered a nervous breakdown.

Within a year, however, as president of the American Civic Association he was crusading again against urban blight and decay, and promoting trees, parks, and town planning. He resumed leadership of the fight to preserve the national parks for their scenic beauty and to establish a national park service.

The U.S. Chief Forester, Gifford Pinchot, who “managed” and advocated “fair use” of the nation’s forests, viewed trees for their economic utility. Pinchot wanted the parks moved under the supervision of the Forest Service. In an address to the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1916, McFarland argued that “the future of the national parks depends on the action of thoughtful men all over the country, who will help to bring the American people to realize . . . how they ought to be developed as great pleasure grounds, as great scenic reserves, and as holding inviolate the notabilities of nature.” He went on to say that “this sort of education . . .



ABOVE: Breeze Hill, 1978 (*photo courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*)

LEFT: 'Editor McFarland', a deep pink Hybrid Tea (Mallerin) introduced in the U.S. in 1931; from McFarland's *Roses of the World in Color*, 1938

will lead to the establishment of a national park service, with its skilled and permanent force, with its civil and not military guards and rangers, with its engineers and advisers, so that these parks cannot be made . . . the victims of an incidental political change."

McFarland had earlier drafted a bill to establish one agency within the Department of the Interior to unify management of the 41 national parks and monuments. He somehow enlisted his former Hetch Hetchy opponents as allies and called in landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. to rewrite the bill. The National Park Service was established in 1916, and McFarland served as a member of the National Park Trust Fund and on an advisory board for the parks until his death.

From 1916 to 1943 McFarland was the editor of the *American Rose Annual*, and from 1930 to 1932, president of the America Rose Society. In 1930 he edited and published *Modern Roses*, which he later revised as *Modern Roses II* (1940) and *Modern Roses III* (written with Catherine E. Meikle in 1947). He was over 50 when he began his first garden on two and a half acres on the edge of Harrisburg. Christened Breeze Hill by his wife, the property became a source of pure joy. Once in his garden, he wrote a friend in 1912, “Nothing else matters.” Boston landscape architect Warren Manning helped McFarland design it. There was no formality except in an area closest to the old Victorian house; the rest of the outlines were drawn in sweeping curves that followed the contours of the pie-shaped property. A 25-year old rose garden was uncovered the year the family moved in, and McFarland built a rose arbor, planting it with ‘Lady Gay’, ‘Hiawatha’, ‘W.C. Egan’, and ‘Alberic Barbier’.

In his book *My Growing Garden*, McFarland called Breeze Hill his “open-air school, in what it has taught me; it has been my physical regeneration from the debility of overwork.” McFarland loved trees. His new property abounded with pines, hemlocks, maples, and horse chestnuts. The first chapter opens with his photo of “a glorious old giant of a sycamore.” Roses were a central element. They somehow thrived in the shale-based soil but were by no means the only plants he loved. He writes enthusiastically about “China asters” and Cuthbert raspberries, bemoans the fact that he can’t afford the latest peonies, assures readers that June isn’t just for roses but for strawberries, dreams of a rock-garden, and longs for “just a bit of a water garden . . . in which I may see bloom the lovely hardy water lilies.”



ABOVE: Of Dr. Van Fleet's 1915 large-flowering Climber 'Bess Lovett', McFarland wrote that it "has brilliance in color, freedom and strength in growth, and an abundant flowering habit"

RIGHT: This photo was taken in the Elizabeth Park Rose-Garden, in Hartford, Connecticut, the first public rose garden in America (both photos from *Roses of the World in Color*, 1938).



In the first half of the twentieth century, McFarland's name was well known, his influence widespread. Sixty-one years on from his death in 1948, his battles are fought anew. Hetch Hetchy is gone forever, its wildflower-spangled meadows alive only in the dreams of 90-year old conservationists. Niagara Falls is turned off at night, its waters diverted to supply the beast. Water worldwide is the new playground for greedy global elites.



ABOVE: The sundial at Breeze Hill in the formal garden near the house in 1942; it is now located in The McFarland Memorial Rose Garden behind Grace United Methodist Church, Harrisburg, PA.

RIGHT: McFarland in the garden at Breeze Hill in 1939  
(photos courtesy of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania)

The gardens at Breeze Hill are gone; only the sundial remains, forgotten in a small garden behind a Harrisburg church. The time is ripe for a horde of new McFarlands armed with the determination to preserve our rose heritage, to protect our trees, to provide a green and growing earth for all our grandchildren.

*Author's Note:* I would like to thank Stephen Bachmann, the curator of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for searching the Society's collection for photographs of McFarland and Breeze Hill for this article. His kind assistance is much appreciated.

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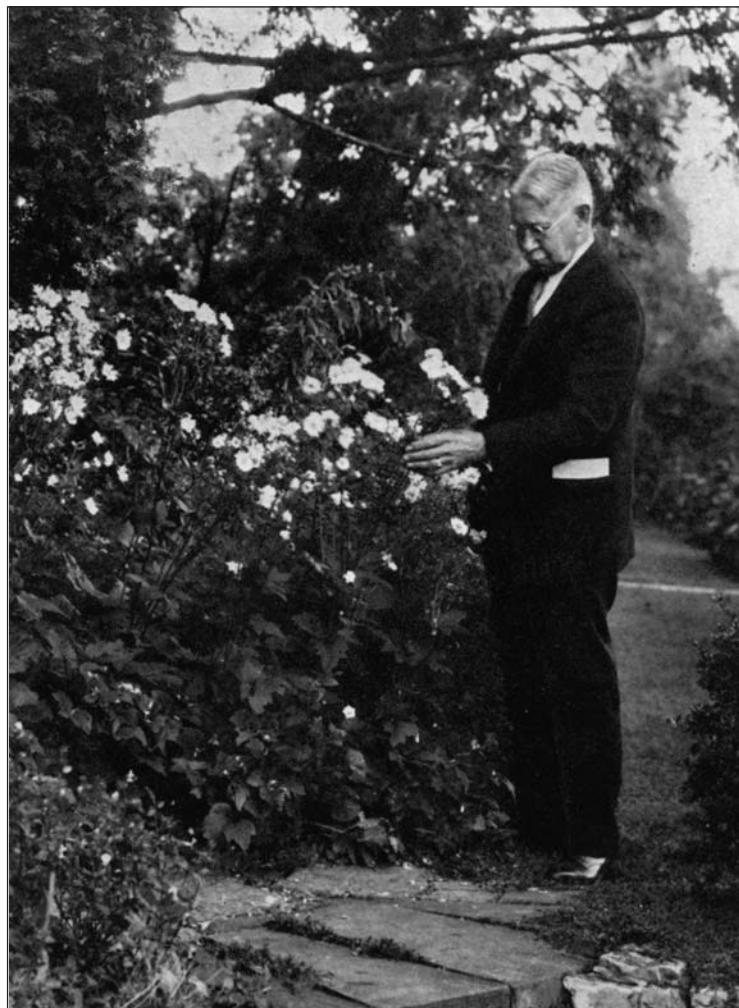
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*“Octogenarian as I am, I never can stand back of a press as the blue impression is being put on a sheet without a renewed sense of wonder that this application should change the unattractive yellow and red first impression to the magic of reality.”*

—J. Horace McFarland  
in an article on William Kurtz, inventor of the color photographic process



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VIRGINIA KEAN is the editor of *Noisette Roses, 19th Century Charleston's Gift to the World*, published by the Charleston Horticultural Society in 2009. She lives and writes in Redwood City, California, where she tends a garden of old Teas, Bourbons, and Hybrid Musks with her Scottish Terriers. Her master's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, is in Asian Studies.